A History of Japanese 78s

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Millie is a new member of the Antique Phonograph Society, and a recent recipient of an APS scholarship. Do you know a young collector who might be interested in joining? Reach out to president@antiquephono.org for more information.

I'm excited to share the history of 78s in Japan with all of the APS journal readers. Hopefully you all will learn something. There's a lot to unpack. Actually, there are no "78s" in Japan, sort of. In Japan, 78s are called "SPs" or "Standard Playing" records. However, the full term "Standard Playing" is applied to all speeds of records. For consistency, I'll just call them 78s or cylinders.

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Around the early 1900s, Japan saw its first records.[1] These were cylinder records issued by Edison under the "Edison Gold Moulded Record" label. This venture ended quickly, as only 4 records were issued. Columbia also dove into the record scene, creating Japan's first disc records (78s). Several were issued, mostly traditional Japanese folk music from the Edo era of Japanese music. The final label of the early 1900s was the American Record, which was later absorbed into Nipponophone (a later division of Columbia Records).

During the 1910s and 1920s Nitto, Victor, and Nipponophone emerged. These 3 would compete for the Japanese record market. Nitto would end up taking a third place overall. Nipponophone issued traditional, military, and classical records- while Victor issued Japanese records and conversions from their American issues.

Unfortunately, during the Second World War, the Japanese government started a crackdown on foreign words (including English words). Nipponophone split from Columbia, being renamed to 日蓄工業株式會社 & ニッチク (Nitchiku) forcefully by the Japanese Communications Ministry to remove Latin letters. Victor survived the purge but would split from RCA Victor of America forming Victor of Japan.[2] Eventually, ニッチク would become Nippon Columbia after the war, keeping the late 1920s and 30s style of Columbia label (also used by ニッチク), as they didn't receive new material from Columbia of America. Victor of Japan stayed as Victor of Japan, but would eventually become JVC in the 1970s.

Postwar, Japanese Pop, Boogie and Jazz reappeared onto the newly formed labels. Pop, Boogie and Jazz had been banned by the government during the war, citing that it was "too western." Now that it was no longer banned, Japan's music scene was rapidly changing. Many GIs stationed in Japan brought back records of this era (1940s) when they returned home.

Japan's record scene really began to take off in 1950s, with the US government supporting English speaking programs in Japan, many singers began singing their songs in English, before also repeating it back in Japanese. This idea was popularized by Izumi Yukimura. Yukimura also popularized early soul and rock & roll in Japan, with "Let Me Go Lover", "Yakety Yak", and "I Want You To Be My Baby." Unfortunately, this is where both Japanese 78s/SPs and 78s in general ended, with the 45 and 33 becoming the dominant formats in just a few years.

Today, collecting Japanese 78s & SPs can be extremely fun. All eras are generally rare except the postwar issues of the late 1940s. It's even reasonably possible to find them in the United States, where GIs stationed in Japan brought records (and women!) home with them. I have even found an early (1903) Columbia Japanese record (which I later sold for $70) in a thrift store in Washington, DC. Personally, I enjoy the records from after the war. The early issues, while collectible don't really sound that good. Maybe that's just my music taste though. I hope everyone can find something they would like in these records. There's not that much interest in them, though in recent years, Japan seems to appreciate their musical past more- with "SP" record clubs beginning to form in Tokyo & Kawasaki. Overall, Japanese Records are as fun to listen to just as much as their history is!

COLUMBIA RECORD
GRAND PRIZE
HIGHEST POSSIBLE AWARD
PARIS 1900 · ST. LOUIS 1904 · MILAN 1906.
PATENTED DEC 10 1901 NOV 25 1902 JAN 2 1906
OTHER PATENTS PENDING
No. 47743

Notes:

1. Early domestic Japanese records appeared as early as the late 1890s.

2. Many records were marked as "Cenorship Approved" by the Japanese Government.